New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of May 12, 1952*

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Shuffle Along"

Journal American

May 9, 1952

The Whole Thing Lacks Distinction

By JOHN McCLAIN

LAST NIGHT'S REVIVAL of "Shuffle Along" at the Broadway Theatre is a big brash musical, always pretentious, sometimes tuneful, but sorrowfully lacking in humor and stand-out star material.

In this latest resuscitation of the all-Negro smash of the early twenties there is still "I'm Just Wild About Harry," "Love Will Find a Way" and some entirely agreeable new music; there is a decorative line of dancing dolls, the choreography is at least adequate and the principals are considerably capable. It just seems to me that the whole thing lacks distinction.

There is no great new dancer, singer or comedian; there is nothing fresh in the situation or the lines. I had hoped that a show of such dimensions would produce a new Bill Robinson, Bert Williams, Ethel Waters, Pearl Bailey or Lena Horne. Instead I saw only a series of competent though uninspired performers.

* * *

Not Rewarding

This version of "Shuffle Along" concerns life in the Army, GIs and WACs stationed in Italy just before the end of hostilities.

The main festivities involves Dolores Martin, playing the part of a WAC sergeant, and Napoleon Reed, as a captain in the French Army. There also is a secondary love story featuring Thelma Carpenter and Avon Long.

Flournoy Miller and Hamtree Harrington appear at regular intervals to supply comic relief, but their efforts are not notably rewarding. Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake appear briefly as themselves in the last number.

Miss Martin and Mr. Reed can both deliver a fine song and they succeed nobly with "Love Will Find a Way." Later she stopped the show with a new double-entendre entitled "You Can't Overdo a Good Thing."

There were many other bright interludes: Eddie Rector's dance to "Swanee Moon," the mannequin number at the beginning of the second act and Louise Woods, and Leslie Scott's obbligato to the repeat chorus of "Love Will Find a Way."

The sets by Albert Johnson are luxuriant and stimulating and Waldo Angelo's costumes are brilliant.

In fact the only things missing are bright words and new talent.

"SHUFFLE ALONG"

Musical comedy with book by Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith; lyrics by Noble Sissle; music by Eubie Blake; additional music and lyrics by Joseph Meyer and Floyd Huddleston; staged by George Hale; book directed by Mr. Smith; choreography by Henry Le Tang and Arleigh Peterson; scenery by Albert Johnson; costumes by Waldo Angelo; presented by Irving Gaumont in association with Grace Rosenfield at the Broadway Theatre, May 8, 1952. The cast:

Bugler.....William Dillard
Master Sergeant..James E. Wall
Cpl. Betty Lee.....Thelma Carpenter
Lt. Jim Crocker.....Avon Long
Col. Alexander Popham.....Earl Sydnor
Maj. Joseph Gantt.....William McDaniel
Capt. Frederick Graham.....T. S. Krigarin
Sgt. Lucy Duke...Delores Martin
Cpl. Louie Bauche..Leslie Scott
Capt. Harry Gaillard.....Napoleon Reed
Pvt. Cyphus Brown.....Flournoy Miller
Pvt. Longitude Lane.....Hamtree Harrington
Chaplain.....Laurence Watson
Mable.....Mable Lee
Fifeto.....Henry Sherwood
Rosa Pasini.....Louise Woods
SS Trooper.....Harro Meller
Laura Popham.....Urylee Leonardos
Sgt. Mabel Powers.....Marie Young
Margie.....Sara Lou Harris
Noble Sissle.....) Themselves
Eubie Blake.....)

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 9, 1952

'Shuffle Along' Does Just That

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The 1952 version of "Shuffle Along" can stir up only the palest memories of the really great Negro musicals of the 20s.

Out of the original show of this title came "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way," which Florence Mills sang with great success. It was written by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, who have done most of the current score, and appear now briefly toward the end of the evening in a reminiscent bit.

You Can Imagine!

Sadly the present show lacks fire, pace, distinction and gaiety. It has some eager entertainers, who are hamstrung by a disorganized production and a flabby book. But it lacks real personalities.

When you learn that the show all but submerges someone who can be as electric as Avon Long, you can imagine its nature.

Far and away the most fun of the evening are the couple of sequences when Flournoy Miller and Hamtree Harrington take over in what amounts to a vaudeville act. It is dialogue of fine old jokes, well told, and recalls a high style of entertainment that nobody seems able to commit, even on television, any more.

Wild and Garish.

The show is hung on a casual book that starts in the Army at the end of the war in Italy. This keeps the whole first act pretty drab to look at. The second act takes place in a dress shop in this country. Wild color and garish fashions attempt to make up for the dim start.

Delores Martin has been married to Hamtree Harrington while they were both on a binge. The story deals with his being declared dead, while very much in evidence. Various romantic duos complicate the evening.

Miss Martin is a handsome girl with an agreeable voice and a not very volcanic personality. She won several encores with a number called "You Can't Overdo a Good Thing," which struck me as being pretty ordinary.

Sand Dance.

Thelma Carpenter does her best to make a soubrette out of an underwritten part, but gets a big audience response with "Give It Love," as well as with "Bitten by Love," a duet she does with Avon Long at the start, which holds out more promise than is ever fulfilled.

Mable Lee has some nice crisp moments with a couple of songs, and Eddie Rector got a big hand for his sand dance.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

May 9, 1952

'Shuffle Along'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE new edition of "Shuffle Along" has endured so many vicissitudes—its scenery was once burned out, several of its principal performers have been on the sick list, and financing was apparently a prolonged headache—that one wishes all the agony might have ended in triumph.

But the show which opened at the Broadway Thursday night is no more than a minor vaudeville masquerading as a full-fledged musical comedy. Librettists Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith have made a casual and wholly ineffectual stab at some kind of a story-line, and they have commissioned Albert Johnson to design acres of scenery to help illustrate it. They have not, however, been able to give their wartime fable either humor or coherence, and a great many attractive and energetic people are left wandering aimlessly about an eerily empty stage.

The basic joke, insofar as there is one, has to do with the fact that Pvt. Longitude Lane, who has been declared dead by the Army, is in a position to watch his supposed widow conduct a variety of flirtations with other men. Hamtree Harrington, who plays Pvt. Lane, is a droll, pop-eyed comedian of obvious talent, but there isn't a line or a bit of business he can get his teeth into all evening; and his comic sidekick, played by author Miller, is left to scowl and growl over remarkably unfunny lines of his own composition.

I suppose that some of this lamentable nonsense might have been rescued by half a dozen really vigorous production numbers. And, truth to tell, there are some effective tunes.

From the original and highly successful "Shuffle Along" of 1921 composer Eubie Blake and lyricist Noble Sissle have borrowed the agreeable "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way." Delores Martin does handsomely by both of them. In addition, Joseph Meyer and Floyd Huddleston have provided Miss Martin with a rousing second-act number called "You Can't Overdo a Good Thing." Miss Martin stops the show with it.

But nearly all the songs are given such routine treatment that they become indistinguishable from one another, and what George Hale, who devised and staged the entire production, has been doing since the start of rehearsals I cannot imagine.

Among the incidental—and infrequent—pleasures of the evening must be listed Eddie Rector's dancing of "Swanee Moon," the bright and engaging work which Thelma Carpenter and Avon Long do on "Bitten by Love," and an extra stanza of "Love Will Find a Way," sung by Leslie Scott and Louise Woods. Albert Johnson's settings are so badly lighted that it is difficult to reach much of a judgment about them, but his exterior for an Italian cafe struck me as being exceptionally attractive.

With the book dragging itself about the stage, and the dance numbers blending lazily into one another, "Shuffle" is a rather extravagant word for the pace of the show at the Broadway. I'm afraid that this latest version of a once beloved song-and-dance frolic is distinguished only by its ancestry.

Daily Mirror

May 9, 1952

'Shuffle Along' Revived At Broadway Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Shuffle Along" was a sensation back in 1921. It had the zing and speed of a bullet. It was loaded with laughs and hummable songs. It was packed with great Negro talent. Some of its chorus girls even blossomed into stars. It set a new pattern for its time.

Last evening Irving Gaumont and Grace Rosenfield revived the history-making hit at the Broadway Theatre. The big house was jammed with sentimentalists. The customers had evidently come to enjoy themselves, and they did, in a big way. They greeted each and every number, from curtain to curtain, with rousing appreciation.

As a "Shuffle Along" devotee from away back, we wish our report could be more favorable this morning. We are sorry that Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith lost a lot of the original fun in rewriting the book. That Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake permitted the interpolation of a couple of suggestive songs into their wonderful score.

Miller and Smith have changed the locale to Italy during World War II and New York after the Armistice. The principals are soldiers, sailors and WACs who, after having served with distinction in our armed forces, return to start businesses over here. They have their romances, troubles and triumphs.

Co-author Miller has teamed with Hamtree Harrington to head the comedy corps. You couldn't ask for better comedians. In fact, they almost succeed in garnering laughs from spots where they haven't been planted. Sissle and Blake came on too late for us to catch them because of an onrushing deadline. They offered "Reminiscing." It would have been a pleasure to hear them, for they have lots to reminisce about.

Other standouts in the cast are Delores Martin, Thelma Carpenter, Avon Long, Napoleon Reed and Earl Sydnor. The Misses Martin and Carpenter are personable, sprightly and know what to do with a good song. Reed, too, has an excellent voice. Long, one of our favorites, has too little to do. His fine talent is often wasted.

George Hale supervised the production. Smith directed the book at a fast pace. And Henry Le Tang has staged lively dances, though they seem to lack the inspired zip of their predecessors. Eddie Rector stopped the show with an old-fashioned sand dance, something we seldom see today—even in what's left of vaudeville.

Albert Johnson's settings and Waldo Angelo's costumes must have cost a sizable fortune. The orchestrations by Charles E. Cooke and the vocal arrangements by Claude Garreau are first-rate.

Sissle and Blake's "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way" have deservedly become pop classics. They are just as attractive to the ear now as they were in the early Twenties. Some of their newer songs also should find favor on radio and nitery programs.

If "Shuffle Along" proved a disappointment for us, it certainly didn't for hundreds of other first-nighters. The applause rang the Broadway's rafters. It was terrific, palm-blistering. Seldom have we witnessed such enthusiasm in a theatre.

The New York Times

May 9, 1952

New Version of 'Shuffle Along,' Negro Musical Comedy, Is Presented at the Broadway Theatre

Although trial and travail for the original version of the all-Negro musical, "Shuffle Along," eventually resulted in triumph, a parallel set of vicissitudes has not had the same magic charm for the current edition. Presented at the Broadway Theatre last night before a host of friends and well-wishers, this "Shuffle Along" is full of warm-hearted, earnest, ingratiating performers. But their efforts are put to waste by a fumbling, wandering book plus a surprising lack of humor.

Since this reviewer was not going to the theatre back in 1921, he has no way of really knowing what it was that made the first production the hit it was. Which, perhaps, is just as well. There are few things in life more disillusioning than the turning up of old and faded memories. Suffice it to say that that one dealt with a small-town mayoralty election. The present one is woven around a group of G. Is and Wacs who meet in the Army just before the end of the second World War and then get together to run a dressmaking establishment in New York. To attempt to give any other details would be futile and fruitless. For, clearly, Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith, who are credited with the book, had considerable difficulty in winding up their story.

* * *

As for the score, turned out by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake with an assist from another team, Joseph Meyer and Floyd Huddleston, it is rhythmic most of the time, but it seemed that the best songs were the two that were taken over from the first show. These are "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way," both from the firm of Sicle and Blake. Another one by the pair, "City Called Heaven-Jubalee" is pleasant, and "Farewell With Love" has a nice lyrical quality. But on the whole, even the score is weighted down by the fact they appear to have come first and then the book was written to make use of them.

Nothing, however, could be as disappointing in a musical of this sort as the fact that what humor it has is of the Amos and Andy school and not even in the same class. It is surprising, indeed, that the writers are not aware that humor in New York has changed, especially the taste for dialect comedy of the type heard last night.

The pall that hangs over the show extends even to the dancing. For Henry Le Tang, listed in the program as the choreographer, has relied on the frenetic, and that alone becomes tedious in repetition. And since George Hale takes credit for having devised and staged the entire production he must be singled out, too, for contributing to the unhappy evening. To such players as Avon Long, Delores Martin, Napoleon Reed, Thelma Carpenter, Hamtree Harrington and Earl Sydnor, the wish this morning is for better luck next time.

L. F.

New York Post

May 9, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Attempt to Revive Old Memories

It is often better to let the theater retain its sentimental memories. Last night at the Broadway, an attempt was made to bring back "Shuffle Along" by offering what was described as the 1952 edition of that famous and beloved Negro musical comedy of 1921, and I can only wish that the hopeful sponsors of the enterprise had never thought of an idea so disillusioning. This is certainly not the "Shuffle Along" of so many people's nostalgic dreams. It is just an extremely ordinary and dispiriting effort at entertainment.

In at least one respect, however, the past does have its triumph. So far as I could discover, only two songs have been retained from the original score, the cheerful "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and the charming "Love Will Find a Way," and they are so much better than the new numbers which have been devised for the 1952 edition that comparisons, as Constable Dogberry was saying only last week, are "odorous." Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake can at least pride themselves on writing a pair of show tunes that have a good chance of immortality.

A Bit of Plot

I am relying on some of my distinguished critical colleagues to describe the plot that Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith have devised for the current "Shuffle Along," because I'd sort of like to know approximately what it's about. It struck me as one of the most complicated narratives in the history of musical comedy, grand opera or operetta. It begins in Italy during the recent war and shifts to a fashionable dress-designer's shop in New York, and a lot of time is devoted to it, but the whole thing remained pretty obscure to me.

In the old days, "Shuffle Along" featured the antics of the famous comedy team of Miller and Lyles, whom I remember as being prodigiously funny. The place of Lyles has now been taken by a plaintive clown known as Hamtree Harrington, and the new partners certainly strive nobly. While their jokes are at least archaic enough to have been taken from the original show, I shudder to think that these are the quips New York laughed at uproariously in 1921. It is to be doubted if a team consisting of Jimmy Durante and Bobby Clark could make them seem funny today.

The Jokes

The current edition of the famous show has a considerably more lavish production than the original version offered, but I doubt if it helps much. There is, of course, some good dancing, but the plot gets in the way too frequently, rearing its decidedly ugly head on every conceivable occasion. There is also an elaborate display of gowns in the scene in "Le Salon de Madame Lucy," but I fear the producers should have sold a few of them and bought a new joke or two. Even a good old joke would have contented me, though.

The performers are pleasant and industrious, and, under happier circumstances, most of them would be worth watching. Prominent among them are, in addition to the Messrs. Miller and Harrington, Avon Long, Thelma Carpenter and Dolores Martin, while Sissle and Blake, themselves, make an appearance late in the evening. It is only when those fine songs, "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way," are being sung that it is possible to recall there was once a show called "Shuffle Along" that everybody loved.

DAILY NEWS

May 9, 1952

New Version of 'Shuffle Along' Has Some Nice People but Little Else

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The only similarity between the "Shuffle Along" of 1921 and the "Shuffle Along" of 1952 is the title. The old show was fast, hard-dancing and light-hearted; the new one, which opened last night at the Broadway Theatre, is slow and muddled.

The muddle is the plot, which is credited to Flournoy Miller and Paul Gerard Smith. It begins in the mountains of North Italy at the end of World War II and progresses to a ladies' garment salon in New York City, and I'll be a dirty name if I can tell you how it gets from one place to the other, or why.

Needs More Dancing.

However, some amiable entertainers are involved. At the end the veterans Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake come on stage to do a little medley of some of their old numbers, and ahead of them come good singers and dancers like Thelma Carpenter, Delores Martin, Napoleon Reed, Avon Long and Hamtree Harrington. Once in a while a capable bunch of boys and girls are allowed to break into a dance, but they don't dance long enough or often enough.

Some of the old Sissle and Blake numbers, like "I'm Just Wild About Harry," are retained, and generally are better and gayer than the new songs added by Floyd Huddleston and Joseph Meyer. Huddleston's lyrics often are smutty without being smart.

"Of Thee I Sing"

Daily Mirror

May 6, 1952

'Of Thee I Sing' Terrific And Timely Revival

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Chandler Cowles and Ben Segal brought a terrific and timely revival of "Of Thee I Sing" to the Ziegfeld Theatre last evening. George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind have brought their original book up to date, and the George and Ira Gershwin score is as zippy and zestful as ever.

"Of Thee I Sing" and "Oklahoma!" set new standards for the musical show in America. The former deservedly won a Pulitzer Prize. A political satire in the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition, it was and still is a precedent-shattering song-and-dancer. It towers head and shoulders over most of its competitors. It dares to make you think while you laugh.

When we heard that Cowles and Segal were re-doing "Of Thee I Sing," we had our doubts. We wondered if they could possibly find players to replace Billy Gaxton as the breezy Presidential candidate who campaigned on a platform of "Love," and Victor Moore, as the amiable boob accidentally nominated for Vice President.

It just seemed impossible that others could take over these roles and do them justice. But Jack Carson and Paul Hartman, who thank goodness, don't pretend to be Gaxton and Moore, are wonderful in their individual ways. In fact, Hartman has added something to the part of Alexander Throttlebottom-dance satire. Hartman and Carson teamed in a spoof of terpsichore that completely stopped the proceedings in the second act.

Carson, making an auspicious Broadway bow, is ingratiating and displays an amazingly good voice as John P. Wintergreen. Betty Oakes is charming as the Mary Turner who helped Wintergreen bring romance to the White House. Looking just a little like Lois Moran, who had the role originally, she is easy on the eyes and sings bewitchingly.

Lenore Lonergan has hilarious moments as a Southern belle who almost gets the President impeached for breach of promise.

"OF THEE I SING"

Musical comedy with book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind; music by George Gershwin; lyrics by Ira Gershwin; staged by Mr. Kaufman; choreography by Jack Donohue; scenery by Albert Johnson; costumes by Irene Sharaff; production associates, William Tiernan and Charles F. Spalding; production coordinator, Ann Noyes; revived by Chandler Cowles and Ben Segal at the Ziegfeld Theatre, May 5, 1952. The cast:

Francis X. Gilhooley.....
J. Pat O'Malley
Louis Lippman..Robert F. Simon
Chambermaid....Louise Carlyle
Matthew Arnold Fulton.....
Loring Smith
Senator Carver Jones.....
Howard Freeman
Senator Robert E. Lyons...
Donald Foster
Alexander Throttlebottom..
Paul Hartman
John P. Wintergreen.....
Jack Carson
Mary Turner.....Betty Oakes
Sam Jenkins.....Jonathan Lucas
Diana Devereaux.....
Lenore Lonergan
Emily Benson.....Joan Mann
Announcer.....Mort Marshall
Vladimir Vidovitch....Abe Stein
Yussef Yussevitch....Bob Oran
Chief Justice.....Jack Whiting
French Ambassador.....
Florenz Ames
Chief Senate Clerk.....
Mort Marshall

Florenz Ames is back again as the French ambassador, and in fine comedy form, too. Joan Mann and Jonathan Lucas offer lively stepping. Jack Whiting, Donald Foster, Loring Smith, J. Pat O'Malley, Howard Freeman and Robert F. Simon are other assets. In fact, every member of the cast merits a salute.

Kaufman has staged the book and Jack Donohue the ensembles at jet-plane speed. Albert Johnson and Irene Sharaff have designed appropriately bright and brash settings and costumes. And a bow should go to musical director Maurice Levine.

"Of Thee I Sing" couldn't have timed its arrival better, with presidential conventions coming up. Its barbed, intelligent kidding of politics and politicians may make our voters ask some questions and demand more than they have been getting before they cast their ballots. Be it reported, however, it still prefers Wintergreen for President.

In sum, "Of Thee I Sing" is great. It has everything. Even shapely bathing beauties for the tired business man. Its topical wit and sparkling tunes, its grand cast and high spirits, make a visit to the Ziegfeld imperative. But rush to the box office immediately for tickets, or you may have to wait months to see it.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

May 6, 1952

'Of Thee I Sing' Is Good as New

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There was a delightful proprietary feeling around the Ziegfeld last night for the opening of "Of Thee I Sing." Everyone was acting as if he had personally invented the show.

The revival was a howling success through most of the evening as far as the audience was concerned. It arouses a mixture of emotions, not the least of which is the great pleasure of finding a devoted old friend as witty and spry after 21 years as it was in the first place.

Vintage Gags.

Then too, only a fool could fail to enjoy the idea of roaring all evening in public at barbed jokes about the government, when he realizes what a rare privilege it is.

Some of the irony is even more pointed than before, as in the matter of the Vice President being a nonentity nobody really wants in the top job.

You probably remember that the bright musical thumbed its tilted shiny red nose at graft and ignorance, while a sprightly and personable candidate for President swept to victory on a platform of love. His wife was due to be chosen at the Atlantic City Beauty Contest, but he found her first. When complications threatened their marriage she saved the day in the one way in the world which sets a wife beyond conflict or accusation.

Show Stoppers.

The Gershwin songs ring out with as much familiarity and little contempt as Christmas carols. Remember "Wintergreen for President," "Love Is Sweeping the Country," "Of Thee I Sing," "Mine" and "Who Cares?"

Where Gaxton and Moore once reigned supreme, we now have Jack Carson and Paul Hartman. Carson is a huge and amiable fellow of pictures and TV, who has all the energy and earnestness needed for this Prexy. He sings with skidding pitch, which is not at all unpleasant, and seems constantly to be ad libbing.

Paul Hartman could not have been topped as Throttlebottom, the forgotten Vice President. When he fell into his familiar bumbling dances soon after the start, the crowd roared an ovation. Later he and Carson stopped the show dead with a soft-shoe number.

As the heroine, Betty Oakes has the double virtue of looking completely natural and singing like a talented bird. Lenore Lonergan, as her rival, makes a remarkable pattern of humor out of a Southern accent and a French one.

Twice Joan Mann and Jonathon Lucas trip about in bright dance affairs, and Florenz Ames is back where he started in the first production with "The Illegitimate Daughter." Jack Whiting, so many times musical hero, turns up in different guise and his knowing professional manner every few minutes.

Loring Smith is solid as a Senate ringleader. And every actor in the show has to race to keep up with the witty performance of the inserted newsreel.

It is true that the second act slows down, and could be cut and played faster. Also that a few of the old jokes fall pretty pat on the ear. But for much the most part, the great old favorite has been renewed and revivified with love and infinite success.

DAILY NEWS

May 6, 1952

'Of Thee I Sing' Lovingly Revived, But Washington Is Funnier Today

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Whenever George Gershwin's music is being played, sung or danced, "Of Thee I Sing" is a wonderful show, for here is a score that is as jaunty, witty and melodious as it was when it sent us first-nighters into frenzies of delight on the night after Christmas 20 years ago at the Music Box. But when the George Kaufman-Morrie Ryskind book intrudes in the revival of this fabled musical, it's a rather uneven show—still hilarious at times, but at other times rather dated.

"Of Thee I Sing" was given a handsome and affectionate production last evening at the Ziegfeld, and from the applause for each theme in the overture I'd say most of the audience had seen and loved the show long before. I know I had; I'd seen it 13 times at the Music Box and had thought it the best musical ever written each time. Last night it made no difference to me that Paul Hartman instead of Victor Moore was playing Throttlebottom, or Jack Carson instead of Bill Gaxton was Wintergreen, or Betty Oakes instead of Lois Moran was Mary Turner. Indeed, I thought they were fine, and so was the rest of the new company. What did make a difference to me was the book, which once was a gem of humor and invention.

It Was Easy Then.

When Kaufman and Ryskind satirized Washington politics in 1931 they had a simple target, for politicians were simple then. Jokes about the Supreme Court or the lack of job knowledge of Cabinet members were easy, and the country's only real trouble was a piddling depression. George Gershwin's clever brother, Ira, found it easy to be a U. S. W. S. Gilbert, lampooning the foibles of government and the government set.

But today satirists aiming at national politics must raise their sights and shoot farther and higher, for in order to succeed as entertainers they must be funnier than the subject they are satirizing. "Of Thee I Sing" has been brought up to date here and there with topical references to Harry Vaughan and loud beach shirts, but it still is not as funny as Washington itself is today. It is Washington which is the satire on the musical.

Good Cast.

It still is a grand show for anybody with a sentimental turn of mind, and for fast and continuous laughter there is nothing to match the movie-screen election bulletins reporting Wintergreen's progress toward the Presidency. No one could fail to have his heart lifted by such numbers as "Wintergreen for President," "Because, Because," "Some Girls Can Bake a Pie," "Who Cares," "Love Is Sweeping the Country" and the irresistible "Of Thee I Sing."

Paul Hartman makes a very funny vice-president and he does something Victor Moore couldn't do—he gets mixed up with some pretty girls in one of his disastrous dance numbers. Jack Carson is pleasant as the president, even though he doesn't campaign with the zing Gaxton had, and Betty Oakes is delightful as Mary Turner, the girl who can make corn muffins. Florenz Ames still sings the fine song about the illegitimate daughter of an illegitimate son of an illegitimate nephew of Napoleon, but Lenore Lonergan over-burlesques her role of the fairest flower of the Southland.

It's a good-looking production, with sets by Albert Johnson and costumes by Irene Sharaff, and it seems to me that the chorus girls and show girls are much prettier than they used to be. Which proves that I'm 20 years older than I was 20 years ago, doesn't it?

Journal-American

May 6, 1952

One Revival That Doesn't Come Off

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE TROUBLE with "Of Thee I Sing,' which was revived at the Ziegfeld Theatre last night, seems to be simply that a great score is not enough. The book is archaic, the efforts to bring it up to date are inadequate, and the current cast is something less than inspiring.

The one signal improvement over the original show are the lantern slides of the election returns, and I think most of us would have come away happier if they'd just run the slides and played the great music and called it an evening.

The world was a different place when "Of Thee I Sing" was first unfurled 20 years ago. There had been a depression and internal troubles and everybody was fed up with the Administration, but there was not the imminence of a global holocaust or the sense of so much vital importance attaching to the White House.

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Not Funny Now

SOMEHOW IT JUST isn't as hilarious now to make all that fun of the Vice-President (we GOT one, didn't we?), or the Supreme Court, or even the Senate, for that matter. All these people are in the news every day and what they do has become very personal and entirely unfunny to most of us.

That struck me as a basic difficulty when the show was first announced and I found almost nothing last night to refute the opinion that it would be tough to modernize. Within the present frame-work lines like, "What ever became of Harold Stassen?" and allusions to letters the President may have written and failed to mail created only an embarrassed silence.

In behalf of the authors it must be submitted, however, that their material might have fallen into more skillful hands. Jack Carson, who plays the role of the President-elect is a young man of proven capabilities in Hollywood and on radio and TV, but as Wintergreen he was hopelessly miscast.

There was none of the ebullience, the almost repulsive verve and self-confidence that Bill Gaxton lent to the original part. Carson plays the whole thing as though he half believed it.

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Hartman Fails

PAUL HARTMAN, on the other hand, would probably be an acceptable successor to Victor Moore, who made history as the Vice-President, if he were convincingly pitiful and insecure. Neither star, it seems to me, succeeds in bringing to his characterization that broad burlesque upon which the whole structure of the plot depends.

The same goes for Lenore Lonergan, as the cast-off beauty queen; the story might have a better chance with somebody weak and wispish. As for Betty Oakes, who plays the bride of the President, I will say one thing: she has a fine true voice.

It's deeply regrettable that the whole thing doesn't come off. The score is so superb that reminiscent tears come to your eyes when the orchestra plays the introduction, but almost nothing thereafter comes close to the memory of the great show you've cherished all these years.

Maybe it was never that good; maybe, by the same token, it should never have been revived.

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By Richard Watts Jr.

Bringing Back a Celebrated Show

"Of Thee I Sing" is, as everyone knows, one of the famous and honored classics of American musical comedy. A bright, gay and genial lampoon on the great national sport of Presidential campaigns, with characteristically charming Gershwin tunes, it has been cherished in the memory of all who saw it in 1931, and its selection for the Pulitzer Prize that year was considerably more acclaimed than yesterday's award to "The Shrike" is likely to be. Every few years somebody talks about reviving it, and, last night at the Ziegfeld Theater, the long-awaited second presentation was offered for the first time. It leaves me in a slight quandary.

For, to tell you the miserable truth, I couldn't altogether recapture my earlier rapture about it. "Of Thee I Sing" is still unquestionably bright, gay and genial. The Gershwin songs are as delightful as ever, and the book continues to offer a pleasantly mocking but affectionate commentary on American political frailties. The character of Alexander Throttlebottom, the meek and neglected Vice-President, is certainly one of the distinguished humorous creations of theatrical imagination. And those lantern slides announcing the election returns provide the most hilarious moments you are likely to encounter in many a season.

Corn Muffins

All of these things, and more, make "Of Thee I Sing" a likable musical entertainment. Nevertheless, it is my uncomfortable impression that, with the passing of the years, the show's satirical thrusts have lost some of their pungency and point. The times are certainly more to blame than George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, the authors, for the fact that a lot of the edge has gone from the story of John P. Wintergreen, who ran for President on a platform of love, and campaigned by courting Mary Turner, the maker of the best corn muffins in all these 47 states. (Some one, it seems, had gone and sold Rhode Island.)

In other words, it strikes me that the famous musical comedy now sounds more like one of those Gridiron shows in Washington than an authentic American Gilbert and Sullivan. This, of course, may be one of its fine national traits, but it does, I think, keep "Of Thee I Sing" from appearing as consistently witty and amusing as it should be, and as I remembered it being. Continuing to be sullen, I must add that I am no longer particularly fascinated by how the French Ambassador protested that President Wintergreen had insulted his country by jilting the girl who was "an illegitimate daughter of an illegitimate nephew of Napoleon."

The Vice-President

It must have taken considerable courage on the part of Paul Hartman to assume the role of Vice-President Throttlebottom, which was created by Victor Moore, one of the most loved of all American actors. Mr. Moore left his mark indelibly on the famous characterization, but Mr. Hartman, playing it in his own fashion, manages it quite acceptably. As John P. Wintergreen, Jack Carson lacks the contagious vitality that William Gaxton brought to the role, but he, too, handles matters reasonably well. Anyway, these comparisons are no doubt of purely academic interest to the current generation, who shouldn't bother with ancient memories.

For us old-timers, however, Florenz Ames, of the original cast, is again present as the irascible French Ambassador, a part he created. Betty Oakes is now the corn muffins girl and Lenore Lonergan is Diana Devereaux, the cast-off bathing beauty. They aren't likely to make gaffers forget Lois Moran and the late Grace Brinkley, who delighted us in the earlier company. The production moves smoothly and, as I have said, the music and lyrics are still a pleasure. "Mine," the song salvaged from the show's sequel, "Let 'Em Eat Cake," fits comfortably into the brilliant score. Maybe I would have been happier if I had been seeing "Of Thee I Sing" for the first time.